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The Conference Board

A Topical Report from the Consumer Research Center November 1990

Special Consumer Survey Report

Women's Work Is Almost Never Done—by Men

The liberation of the American woman has gone a long way in recent years—but her place, apparently, is still frequently in the kitchen. According to the findings of a recent Conference Board survey, the day-to-day housekeeping responsibilities continue to be primarily woman's work. It apparently makes only a slight difference if she is out earning a pay check. The survey, conducted for the Board by National Family Opinion, Inc., covered a representative national sample of 5,000 homes. People were asked how often the male member of the family does those household chores which traditionally have been regarded as the responsibility of the woman. Women, in turn, were asked how frequently they assumed tasks generally regarded as the male's domain.

Although the American gender revolution has been in process now for well over half a century, the woman of the house is frequently found in the kitchen. Most husbands are rarely there. Men wash the family's dishes "rarely or never," in two out of every five homes. It makes scant difference whether the wife earns a pay check.

Although it is often rumored that men make the best chefs, very few apparently practice the art at home. More than 40% of husbands almost never do the cooking. The frequency is only very slightly higher when the wife is a wage-earner. But there are signs of possible change. The baby boomer male appears to be somewhat more disposed to cook than his father.

Doing the family laundry, however, is very much another matter. Only about one out of every six husbands assume this responsibility with any reasonable degree of frequency. In working-wife families, the incidence is higher—but only barely. Younger men are slightly more likely to run the washing machine, but even they do not assume that responsibility very often. As for ironing, that is almost always a female activity.

Nor do men appear to be particularly enthusiastic about cleaning the house. Two out of every five assume that chore only "rarely or never." The fact that the wife is working does not seem to make much of a difference. However, again, the younger generation is somewhat more disposed to lend a hand than older males.

The activity in running a home which is assumed by the largest number of men is shopping for food. About one out of every three "almost always or often" buy the family groceries. In this instance, older men are more kindly disposed to visit the supermarket than younger men.

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The American husband not only gallantly leaves the routine household chores to the female, but he apparently also sometimes leaves her to assume tasks that are traditionally considered to be the responsibility of the man of the house. For example, a third of all women "almost always or often" prepare the family's income tax returns. A working wife is slightly more likely to assume this responsibility than a traditional housewife. There is very little difference by age of household head. The American housewife is the family's prime bill payer. Some 70% "almost always or often" send out the monthly checks.

The word "handyman" does not seem likely to be dropped in the foreseeable future for the term "handy person." Only 20% of women do minor repairs around the house with any high degree of frequency. Still, over a third do such work "sometimes." The figure is slightly higher among working women as compared to full-time housekeeping wives.

Painting and wall-papering also remain principally a male activity. Most women engage in such work only "sometimes" or "never." Delivering the family car to the garage for repair work is still principally the husband's activity. About half of all wives "rarely or never" assume this responsibility. The young woman is more disposed to visit the garage than her older sister. The only activity which appears to be shared equally by husband and wife is putting out the family garbage.

Fabian Linden

To what extent does the husband in the house perform each of the following household tasks?

	Almost Always	*Often*	*Sometimes*	*Rarely or Never*
Shop for Food	16.5%	16.9%	28.6%	38.0%
Wash the Dishes	9.8	20.2	31.6	38.4
Clean the House	6.3	15.3	38.3	40.1
Cook	5.8	15.7	37.2	41.4
Do the Laundry	6.2	10.9	21.3	61.6
Iron	3.5	4.0	6.6	85.9

To what extent does the wife in the house perform each of the following household tasks?

	Almost Always	*Often*	*Sometimes*	*Rarely or Never*
Pay Monthly Bills	62.5%	8.1%	10.9%	18.5%
Take Out Garbage	25.7	22.2	30.2	21.9
Paint or Wallpaper	17.1	12.4	35.4	44.3
Prepare Tax Returns	28.3	4.7	7.8	59.2
Arrange for Car Repairs	13.0	11.9	26.2	48.9
Do Minor House Repairs	8.0	12.4	35.4	44.3

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